

Wednesday, May 19, 2010

## **Berliner: Don't let Mirant fool you**

On Earth Day, four of my colleagues joined me in introducing legislation that requires major greenhouse gas emitters to contribute to the costs of cleaning up their mess. This measure will recover \$15 million a year from our county's biggest polluter, Mirant. Mirant owns the Dickerson coal-fired power plant that emits 25 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions in the county.

Mirant has launched an all out campaign to kill the measure, one full of distortions and deception. I am confident that my colleagues will not be fooled. Nor should you.

Deception 1: "You will pay this tax." The truth: The tax falls on Mirant, not electricity. Pepco buys 25 percent of its needs at auction every six months. If Mirant's power is competitive, it will be bought. And if it isn't, it will not. Pepco has said the impact of the tax would be "indiscernible."

Deception 2: "This tax is bad for the environment — if Mirant shuts down the plant, then we will import power from dirtier plants." What you should be asking: Who do you trust on environmental issues — one of the country's worst polluters or a coalition of national, regional and local environmental organizations who enthusiastically support the measure?

Mirant recently invested nearly half a billion dollars in this plant and is still able to sell its power competitively. It is one of four Mirant plants in the region that generated \$380 million in profits last year. Do you really think that for \$15 million, Mirant is going to shut down this plant, not recovering its huge investment, and not generate profits? And, finally, in the unlikely scenario that "replacement power" was needed, experts predict cleaner natural gas would provide it.

Deception 3: The tax will not help the county's budget. The real story: Yes it will. The only reason the funds will be placed in reserve this year is because Mirant has threatened to sue. The next fiscal year will be equally challenging, and \$15 million will be quite helpful. [That money] is more than we would recover through an ambulance fee.

Deception 4: This bill will not reduce emissions. Wrong again. This bill would fund the very programs, like the Home Energy Loan Program, that will reduce your utility bills, reduce carbon dioxide emissions and create green jobs. This is the most cost effective way to combat climate change.

Regrettably, The Gazette last week expressed concern that my "well-intended" measure will fuel the image of the county as anti-business and steps into an arena better left to Congress. I disagree.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, carbon dioxide poses a very serious threat to our public health and safety. It is not "anti-business" to expect the most serious offenders to either clean up after themselves or pay their fair share of the costs to clean up after them. Otherwise, their responsibility gets shifted to taxpayers, and that certainly isn't good for business or anyone else. Nor is this matter best left to Congress. It may be years before Congress finally acts. Until then, local government action actually spurs national legislation. In Montgomery County, the combination of our fiscal and environmental imperatives makes this exactly the right time to act.

Don't be fooled. It is responsible, fair, fiscally prudent and good public policy to have polluters — not you — pay to clean up after themselves.

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The writer is a member of the County Council.